

# Conspiracy at the *Washington Post*

**Ambrose Evans-Pritchard has been accused of "conspiracy theorism" over the death of the White House aide, Vincent Foster. Keeping silent, he says, is even worse.**

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MY STRAITJACKET is buckled tight. The foam is wiped off my mouth. A bottle of sedatives sits at hand. I am cool, calm and ready to answer on behalf of all "conspiracy theorists". And I say to the powers of the *Washington Post*: "J'accuse."

Last week the *Washington Post* attacked the *Sunday Telegraph* in a front-page article on the "Foster conspiracy theorists". It was an unflattering piece on the tiny band of critics who have raised questions about what is increasingly looking like the cover-up of the 1993 death of Vincent Foster.

In normal circumstances it would be inappropriate to dispute this, but weighty matters are in the balance here and the *Washington Post* has quasi-monopoly power - a duopoly, perhaps, shared with the *New York Times* - in setting the political agenda for the entire American media. Foster, the deputy White House counsel, was the highest-ranking official to die in violent circumstances since President Kennedy. He was also the intimate friend of both Bill and Hillary Clinton and looked after their personal finances at the White House. The decision by the *Washington Post* to run such a piece at this late stage - in the face of overwhelming suspicions of foul play - comes perilously close to complicity in a cover-up.

The argument has nothing to do with ideology. The *Washington Post* ceased to be a newspaper of liberal activism a long time ago, if it ever really was. "Its anti-establishment image is one of the most absurd myths in journalism today," said Jeff Cohen, from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting in New York, a liberal group that monitors the *Post* closely and accuses it of an incestuous relationship with the governing elite. "It has been an instrument of state power for many years."

**The question is whether the *Washington Post* is sitting on the stories that really matter.**

The team that led the fight against the Nixon Administration and turned the *Post* into the most fashionable newspaper in the world is mostly gone. Kay Graham, the Queen Bee, retired in 1991 after 28 years in charge of the family heirloom. Ben Bradlee, immortalised in *All The President's Men* as the swashbuckling and incorruptible captain of Watergate, is now a semi-detached editor at large. Both, incidentally, have regrets about their role in the great regicide. Neither want to see the same thing happen again in their lifetime. There is talent, still. The coverage of the US occupation of Haiti, by Douglas Farah, has been outstanding. The editorial pages have the finest mix in the business. The Style section is beautifully written. But the question is whether the *Washington Post* is sitting on the stories that really matter, just as the Mexican daily, *El Excelsior*, a vibrant and authentic newspaper to the untutored eye, serves - wittingly or unwittingly - as a mouthpiece and a subtle tool of disinformation for the ruling regime.

Allegations of drug use, sexual shenanigans and misuse of state resources were there for the plucking during Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992. Yet the *Post's* inquiries only skimmed the surface of the charges. Admittedly, it is hard to get people to talk about these things in Arkansas. But not that hard. The *Post* has subsequently refused to make amends. Instead, it has insisted on ever-higher standards of "proof" or, alternatively, down-played the importance of the accusations.

Take the case of Paula Jones, who accused Clinton of sexual harassment when he was Governor of Arkansas. In early 1994 the *Washington Post* was given exclusive access to Jones and to other witnesses who could corroborate parts of her story. The newspaper went through her background with a toothcomb. Weeks went by. The lead reporter, Mike Isikoff, found her claims to be credible and wanted to run the story. The editors refused.

In the end there was a shouting match in the newsroom between Isikoff and the national editor, Fred Barbash. Isikoff was suspended for two weeks and later left the newspaper. The *Post* never ran the original story. I emphasise this point because the paper is now trying to claim that it was just waiting for the appropriate moment. The *Post* was overtaken by events. Paula and Steve Jones were so disgusted by the failure of the paper to publish that they decided to file a sexual harassment suit against the President, forcing the issue into the news pages.

### **Failure to report the news is one thing. Active disinformation is another.**

It is worth noting too that the *Washington Post* ignored the series of well-researched pieces by the *American Spectator* alleging that Bill Clinton used Arkansas state troopers to solicit women on a routine basis, and then played rough to silence leaks. One might choose to treat that as unimportant. A private matter. Beneath the *Post*. But what about the story of gun-running and drug-smuggling through the Mena airport in Arkansas in the 1980s? As reported by *The Sunday Telegraph* in January, the managing editor, Robert Kaiser, intervened at the last moment to spike a story by Sally Denton and Roger Morris that was backed by an archive of 2,000 documents. The story had been cleared by the lawyers. It was typeset and ready to go to the printers. Since then there have been fresh developments in this story. Sworn testimony taken from a court case in Arkansas has linked Bill Clinton directly to this cloak-and-dagger operation, which has possible ties to US intelligence. Not a word about these depositions has been written in the *Washington Post*.

But failure to report the news is one thing. Active disinformation is another. Last week's article in the *Post* insinuated that *The Telegraph* had fabricated a story about clandestine trips to Switzerland by Vince Foster. The author, Susan Schmidt, who is the *Post*'s full-time reporter on Whitewater, said that sources "with access to Foster's American Express receipts say they show no purchase of airline tickets to Switzerland". But when confronted, she admitted that her sources did not in fact have access to information - that *The Telegraph* did have - about the two flights Foster made to Geneva in 1991 and 1992. Furthermore, she had no credit card numbers and she did not know which of Foster's American Express cards may have been involved. Nor did she have any records from the airlines. "These records are closely guarded," she said, by way of explanation. You bet they are, and Ms Schmidt failed to get them. The only information she had, it turns out, referred to a single purchase in July 1993 conducted through the White House travel office. We would surmise that her "sources" (plural) are in the Clinton White House. We rest our case.

### **Is the newspaper that broke Watergate now, intentionally or not, aiding and abetting a cover-up a generation later?**

Ms Schmidt called me before she wrote her piece and asked what I thought about some of the wild allegations being made that Vince Foster had ties to Israeli intelligence and was under investigation by the CIA for espionage.

I told her that it sounded pretty far-fetched and was not consistent with what I knew about Foster. She ignored this. In her article she implied that *The Telegraph* was advancing such claims. But this, broadly, is the method that has been deployed by the *Washington Post* to muddy the waters and discredit anybody who has been asking legitimate questions about the death of Foster. Is the newspaper that broke Watergate now, intentionally or not, aiding and abetting a cover-up a generation later? As for key developments in the Foster case over the past few months, the *Post* has been silent. It failed to report that Miquel Rodriguez, the lead prosecutor looking into the death, had resigned in March because the highly politicised investigation was being obstructed. It does not seem to be aware of enhanced photographs showing that the gun found in Foster's hand was moved around after his death, and that Foster had a wound on his neck that the authorities had tried to cover up. Ms Schmidt, however, says that the *Post* is doing a terrific job. "The *Washington Post* has broken every story about Whitewater," she said. "At least every story that's been true."

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